



Courage and Faith in Hard Times

by Starhawk

SINCE GENOA, a lot of people have been telling me how brave I am. I've always thought it was a mistake to get a reputation for courage, on the grounds that if you acted bravely once, people would expect you to act courageously again, and you might be having an off day. Be that as it may, I've been thinking about courage. It's not such a rare or unusual trait. It's just that combination of denial and fatalism that gets us out onto the freeway every day, or up in an airplane, or into any of the thousand ordinary situations in which we have a higher chance of dying or being hurt than in even the most grim demonstration.

When we were trapped in the IndyMedia Center while police were brutally beating the people sleeping in the school across the street, we weren't doing anything spectacularly courageous. We were just there. We were, in fact, hiding. I like to think that if we had felt there was anything useful

or helpful we could do in the situation, we would have gone and done it, whatever the cost. Lisa and I had certainly spent a lot of the weekend doing what we perceived were useful and helpful things, sometimes putting ourselves in greater danger because of it — her more than me, because she's little and can move fast and has amazing tactical skills combined with a cat's curiosity. But the reality is that during the raid we felt no urge to go try and calm the police (when we couldn't speak Italian) or throw our bodies between their sticks and the people they were beating — we just hid.

When people tell me I'm brave, the subtext I often hear is "I could never do what you've done." But I was certainly no more courageous than anyone else in Genoa, and the people who were there

demonstrating were really no different than any people in any demonstration anywhere. They all had their counterparts in Burlington or San Francisco or Sao Paolo. They weren't some other breed of human, they just happened to be there. Maybe courage is just the ability to rise to the occasion of wherever you happen to find yourself. And I believe most human beings have that ability.

I went to Genoa because of a Tarot reading. I hadn't intended to go. I actually thought flying across the ocean to go to a protest I knew was not going to be peaceful just three months after coming back from the tear-gas fest in Quebec City would be a bit excessive, if not neurotic. But as soon as I began meditating on the double spiral vortex we were visualizing to send magical support, I felt a few twinges of desire to be there. I was so sure I shouldn't go that I decided to pull a few cards just to confirm my mature and sensible

decision — well, it wasn't even a decision. I wasn't seriously even considering going. Then I looked at the cards and they said crystal-clearly that I should go. I was caught by my own vortex: I'd been invoking positive influences to be attracted there, and I became one of those influences. It took me a day or so to really make up my mind. I asked for a sign. I had meetings set for the next week — within two hours both people had spontaneously called me. I was able to get a cheap flight, four days before leaving. I was going.

You could say that going was an act of faith. I knew I was supposed to be there although I didn't know why. The way I thought about it to myself was, "Okay, Genoa was one of the things I signed on to do in this lifetime. Why didn't I know that sooner?"

Although I've been a priestess of the Goddess for more than a quarter century now, a Witch, a teacher, all of that, I often feel that I don't have the same kind of deep, personal faith many people in our community do. To me, the Goddess is not so much a personality as a great force of regeneration acting through the cycles of birth, growth, death and rebirth. I perceive her as love, but as a great, impersonal force, not a Mommy who will necessarily look after me. Her scale and time frame are so far beyond the human. I'm not sure she grasps pain in the way we do.

I knew I was serving that force in some way, that I was supposed to be in Genoa, in the IMC that night, although I didn't know why. But to say "I was supposed to be there" implies some larger plan, some Planner. To think, "this is in my contract for this lifetime" implies someone I made a contract with, or to. My faith in a personal deity might be shaky, but I have an unshakeable faith in doing what I came in to do — or rather, that that's the only thing in life really worth doing, if you can figure out



what it is. But of course it's one thing to promise yourself to some mad act when you're wandering in the Silver Isle of Apples in delicious disembodiment, and another to carry out that promise in your all too fragile and mortal body.

When the police came in, we couldn't get out the door so we ran upstairs, with somewhat the same instinct that propels people upwards on a sinking ship. We grabbed sleeping bags to pad ourselves if we got beaten, and hid under some tables, four of us together. Getting beaten, or getting arrested, seemed like a high probability, but I wasn't thinking about it. We knew that down below or across the street, terrible things might be happening to other people, but I wasn't thinking about them. It was as if they'd been sucked down into another realm. I was thinking about breathing, and not coughing. We'd run up five flights of stairs faster than I can run, and while I felt calm emotionally I couldn't catch my breath and I couldn't stop coughing. I knew if the police came in my cough would betray not just me but the others. At that point I invoked a Goddess personal enough that I could say to her "You absolutely have to make me stop coughing." I recall also thinking about all my ancestors who had ever hidden from pogroms. I stopped coughing.

We lay there, and I wasn't so much aware of being afraid. I was grounding, and relieved to be able to breathe slow and silently and deep. At that point, whatever happened was just going to be what happened. If we lay under that table all night, well, we just did. If we got beaten up, well, we just would. I was mostly aware of feeling love. I felt immense love for Lisa and Jeffrey and the young man whose name I can't remember but who lay there with us. I'd met him on Friday, on the street after the police swept through and beat people badly. He had a wound on the side of his temple and was holding his arm where the police had hit him. But he was not as badly hurt as some who had gone to the hospital, only to be arrested there. And tortured in the jail. I felt love for my companions and I felt the tremendous power of the love and protection and magic I knew was coming to us. Because I'd been on the phone home when the police attacked, I knew my closest friends and partner knew we were in danger, and were sending us love and protection. I knew there were circles and circles of Witches who had us on their altars and were stirring cauldrons and weaving spells, willing us to be in the right place at the right time, with the protection and

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photos by Lisa Fithian

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resources to do the work. That didn't necessarily guarantee our physical safety or freedom: maybe the work would require getting hurt or going to jail. There's bound to be a certain amount of suffering in challenging the rulers of the world, and while I had absolutely no desire or attraction to suffering I was willing to accept whatever came. Or rather, being willing had nothing to do with it. I was just there. Whatever was going to happen would happen. A lot of people loved us and cared about what was going to happen. That was all.

And in the end, it turned into a different kind of a night. The police left our building — it's still not completely clear why. A woman was there who was a Member of Parliament. We simply stared out the windows for hours, watching the scene across the street, where nothing had restrained the violence, watching them carry out stretcher after stretcher in a kind of dead calm horror. It was as if the wounded and the beaten had slipped into some other dimension where we couldn't follow. I remember when I once nearly drowned, how I felt about the people on land. They were safe, more than that, they were safety itself: if they knew what was happening to me, if I made

contact by sight or sound or thought, that safety would reach to me like a rope and draw me back. But we were watching our friends being carried away. A few were walking, hands up, heads averted. We couldn't see the faces of those they carried out on stretchers, couldn't know who they were, who we would miss in the morning. And such safety as we possessed couldn't touch them.

I went to Genoa, I now believe, to bear witness to that scene, to work some small piece of magic on the grim forces gathered there, to bring them out into the light, expose them, undercut their power. But if I deserve credit for courage, it's not for anything I did there, it's for this, now that I'm home and safe: the daily struggle to remain open to love, to the beauty of the ocean, the grasses in the wind, the trees, knowing how fragile we all are, and what it looks like when it's smashed.

For more news and resources, visit www.starhawk.org

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Year of Loss, Year of Return

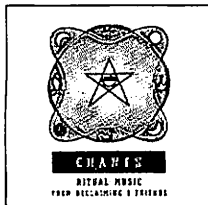
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emotions, beyond despair and the quest for understanding, I knew my relationship with the Goddess was forever changed. I was an initiate to a form of womanhood that most women do not endure — a rite of passage that I had not chosen, but that had chosen me. Shortly thereafter, I started a relationship with Ereshkigal to understand the relationship of life, death, and transformation.

My relationships and relating to all things have altered. I look from a different angle. One that says I must make each day special, not just the sabbats and esbats. One that tells me it is imperative to embrace those closest to me and tell them how I feel often. Daniel, now my husband, asks why I tell him I love him so often. My response is always that I have to. My students, some of whom I have had for three years, see my expressiveness as odd. But they never wonder now if I am in a good or bad mood or why. I refuse to hide behind a facade of making other people feel better or hiding my feelings because they are inappropriate. My practice is no longer just observing the seasonal changes or being in community; it is also being in myself and honoring me. I am still learning and changing from my experience. There are

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